

PACIFIC ISLANDS REPORT

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SPAIN SEEKS STRONGER TIES WITH PACIFIC ISLES

Finances projects in Philippines, Micronesia

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MAKATI CITY, Philippines (Marianas Business Journal, July 19, 2010) – The government of Spain is committed to strengthening its ties with its former territories in the Asia-Pacific region which includes the Philippines, Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands.

In an interview with the Journal, Luis Arias y Romero, Spain's Ambassador to the Philippines and the three Pacific island nations, said his country is keen on undertaking more economic cooperation projects with the governments of these nations.

"Without doubt, the Philippines is one of the most important countries for the Spanish cooperation. In the past years the funds committed by Spain for official development assistance have risen sharply," Arias said.

The Spanish government is funding a \$38-million project to build and rehabilitate 93 steel bridges all over the country with a very soft loan via the Department of Public Works and Highways; extended \$23-million export credit insurance to Hedcor, a subsidiary of the Aboitiz Group, which is building two 42-megawatt hydropower plants in Mindanao, southern Philippines; and a \$455,220-grant for a feasibility study on building an airport in the Cagayan Economic Zone, north of Manila.

He added that Spain has contributed extensively in peace-building efforts in Mindanao's conflict areas, through cooperation projects with multilateral development agencies like the United Nations Development Program, and has supported the rehabilitation of typhoon-stricken areas through humanitarian aid.

"Of course, there are other projects in the pipeline, some of them with the private sector and some with the public one. Our work is to help with the promotion of our technology, with the financing, with the establishment of a good bilateral environment," Arias said.

For the Pacific island nations, Spain has extended grants mostly for education, environment protection, as well as historical research and publications.

"The Pacific island nations of Micronesia, Marshall Islands and Palau form part of the archipelagos called the Carolinas and the Marianas, named after Emperor Carlos V and a Spanish Queen. From this fact we can see that Spain and these countries have a joint history which goes back centuries, from the time of their discovery and Christianization. In the 1970s, Spain was one of the first to recognize these countries when they attained their independence and to commence diplomatic relations," Arias explained.

Among the major projects Spain has funded is the construction of a building for the

College of Our Lady of Mercy Professional School for Women (\$316,492) in Palau. According to the project notes, the objective is to "provide professional training for the young women who wish to continue their education at a higher level and are not accepted in the only public high school in the island (which average 500 annually)."

Another project is the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Coastal and Marine Biodiversity of Palau which was completed in 2009. About \$111,000 has been extended to the Palau Bureau of Marine Resources and Coral Reef Foundation.

Spain has also helped publish researches such as "Palau's Lost Priest: The search for Father Luis de Granada" by Richard Knecht and "Identification of the visual images on Micronesia found in major archives and repositories" by Francis Hezel in the FSM.

These researches were funded by Spain's Ministry of Culture under its Program for Cultural Cooperation, which the three Pacific island nations formally joined in grant year 2001. The program is designed to foster closer relations "through the collaborative work of scholars in the Humanities and the Social Sciences and of artists of the participating countries."

Financial support is awarded to projects that study and promote the shared heritage and shared future of these nations with Spain. Studies on Spain, contemporary or historical, fall within the mandate of the program, according to Instituto Cervantes, which administers said program. Created in 1991, the Instituto Cervantes was created in Spain to promote the Spanish language and cultures of Spanish-speaking countries.

Arias said, "In the present, we look forward to expanding and strengthening Spain's relationship with the respective governments of Palau, FSM, and the Marshall Islands, through cooperation for development, with special attention to the protection of the environment, climate change mitigation and the support for renewable energy initiatives."

According to data from the Overseas Economic Cooperation and Development, Spain extended about \$1.3 million in aid to the Oceania region which includes the three Pacific island nations.

Spain colonized the Philippines in 1565 but lost it to the United States in a war with the Americans in 1898. Spain's historical ties with Palau, FSM, and the Marshall Islands started later in 1886. The three island nations were sold to Germany in 1899, as a result of Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American War. MBJ

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